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ABSTRACT

During the last five years, the Prince George's County (Maryland) public school system has brought about dramatic improvements in the academic achievement of at-risk students, offering strong evidence that public education can succeed for all children. This report describes how Prince George's County accomplished this turnaround through a process of high expectations, hard work, and a well-developed plan of districtwide accountability. The plan was comprised of five steps. Step 1, "Taking Ownership of the Problem," involves two phases: (1) identifying educators' low expectations of themselves and negative attitudes about student potential as root causes of the problem; and (2) drafting a mission statement pledging to make sure that all students will learn. Step 2, "Establishing a Set of Measurable Performance Standards," consisted of developing goals that focused on educational outcomes rather than inputs and selecting appropriate assessment tools. Step 3, "Empowering Staff with Knowledge," included staff development and training as key elements in an effective schools model of school improvement. Step 4, "Increasing Autonomy at the School Level," incorporated school based management and decision making. Step 5, "Increasing Resources to Support Innovation," emphasized an active partnership between school staff and parents in educational improvement. The report concludes with a discussion of the model's replication nationwide and a brief summary. (AF)

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Improving the Education of At-Risk Students

A System of Checks and Balances

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Improving the Education of At-Risk Students

A System of Checks and Balances

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Introduction

Columbia Park Elementary School in Prince George's County is buried deep within one of the area's most notorious drug havens. The venerable, tree-lined streets belie the daily press of violence and terror that looms in the community. The real story is told by the inescapable litter of drug paraphernalia on the walkways and playgrounds, by the endless shrill of sirens in the distance and by the alarming murder rate -- the small community of Columbia Park registered 16 murders in the last calendar year. The student body is 95 percent black, largely from single-parent families; all but 10 percent receive some sort of public assistance.

Ten miles away, at another end of the county, sits University Park Elementary School. Nestled within a small, quiet college town, student enrollment is 72 percent white; many are sons and daughters of university professors and only 20 percent come from low-income homes.

What would be your guess as to the relative achievement levels of these two schools?

Most educational experts would predict University Park to far outdistance Columbia Park on national achievement indicators such as the California Achievement Test (CAT). That is not an unreasonable assumption given the enormous pressures facing the students at Columbia Park. The fact is, however, Columbia Park students defied the odds and proved the experts wrong.

Most experts would predict University Park to far outdistance Columbia Park. The fact is, however, Columbia Park students defied the odds and proved the experts wrong.

During the 1988-89 school year, the third graders at Columbia Park scored at the 96th percentile in math on the CAT, surpassing the students at University Park by 12 percentile points. The third graders' overall score (including reading, language, spelling and math) was at the 87th percentile, up from the 69th percentile just three years earlier -- an overall score dead even with that of University Park.

It is important to note that Columbia Park's success runs deeper than standardized test scores. Last year, Columbia Park was one of 225 schools cited nationally for excellence. The President of the United States in awarding the National Elementary Recognition School Award, hailed Columbia Park's outstanding instructional program, high academic goals and strong parent and community involvement.

The real good news is that Columbia Park is not an accident, nor is it an isolated example of success in the county. Anywhere one looks, triumphs are evident. The dramatic turnaround of our county's public schools shatters the myth that at-risk youngsters cannot achieve at the same levels as other children. It is striking proof that public education can work for all of America's children.

Today's public schools in Prince George's County stand in stark contrast to the school system of only five years ago. Back then, many had given up the school system for lost. It was just another large, urban school system, 63 percent black student enrollment, with abysmal test scores, large class sizes, and low teacher morale -- a school system that couldn't rise above staggering budget cuts and a bitterly contested court-ordered desegregation plan.

Today, the school system basks in the light of renewed public confidence. Public funding has risen over 50 percent -- nearly 200 million dollars -- since 1985. Students from private schools are returning to the public school system in record numbers. Over 4,000 candidates apply for the 400 teaching vacancies annually. Students throughout Prince George's County have made statistically significant gains on the CAT's and have shown steady improvement on other pertinent achievement measures. At all grade levels, overall CAT scores have increased 12 percentile points or more and the gap between black and white students' test scores has decreased substantially during the same period. For example, at grade three the black/white gap closed from 25 points in 1984 to just 17 points in 1989.

How has Prince George's County achieved all this? Through a process of high expectations, hard work and a well developed plan of district-wide accountability, the school system has demonstrated that public education can work and work well.

The Prince George's County Plan of Accountability

The preoccupation in education historically was on purchasing more books, hiring more teachers, constructing more buildings -- in short -- raising more revenue. Faced with years of decline in American education, it became apparent that "more" was not the answer. To bring this point home, we all know of cases of high performing students in schools with few resources and low performing students in schools rich in resources. While adequate resources are certainly a necessary condition to improving student achievement, they have proven not to be sufficient, in and of themselves, to bring about the necessary change.

Through a process of high expectations, hard work and a well developed plan of district-wide accountability, the school system has demonstrated that public education can work and work well.

As educators and others searched for ways to turn the tide of declining achievement, attention shifted to how schools could better use their existing resources to achieve desired student outcomes. This movement, known as accountability, switched the focus from educational inputs to educational outputs -- reflecting the view that education was a business and a big business at that. Our "product" is to graduate students who are able to become productive members of society. The key to success in business is to have a clear sense of the relationship between a quality product, and the resources and techniques needed to produce that product. Accordingly, educational accountability consists of three general components: outcome goals, clear measurements of those goals and appropriate strategies to achieve those goals. In the best of all worlds, central office determines the first two components and school staff determine the latter.

To date, accountability efforts across the nation often define themselves in terms of a single program component -- namely setting student outcome measures for staff to achieve -- with little or no attempt to identify those factors which could maximize outcome measures or provide school staff with the knowledge and tools they need to deliver more effective education. In short, accountability in districts is most often used as the "two by four" with which to bring about educational improvement.

The Prince George's plan of accountability distinguishes itself because it was designed to modernize and restructure the educational system as a whole. The focus moved beyond setting standards for educational performance to increasing the capacity and autonomy of staff to deliver effective education. Accordingly, to bring about the desired change and construct a sound accountability system, the following five distinct steps were taken:

1. The school system took ownership of the problem.
2. Outcome-based performance standards were set.
3. Staff were empowered with the knowledge of "what works."
4. School-based staff were given proper autonomy and increased discretion.
5. Additional resources were given to schools to support innovation.

The Prince George's plan is designed to restructure the entire system, moving beyond just setting standards for educational performance to increasing the capacity and autonomy of staff to deliver effective education.

1. Taking Ownership of the Problem

In 1984, as one of my first acts as superintendent, we went public with our low standardized test scores, breaking down the results by race. The data showed that black students trailed white students by 25 percentile points. Alarmed by this news, the community united to confront the problem. The "gap" became a catalyst for change.

We found the root cause of our problem to be low expectations for ourselves and negative attitudes about the potential of our students. Accordingly, we drafted a mission statement around which we would organize all actions of the school system, from those at central office to those in the classroom. The mission statement is simple and clear. Our mission is:

> *To assure that all students acquire the knowledge and develop the skills and work habits to enable them to become productive members of society.*

While there is nothing too profound about the mission statement, the pledge to assure that all students learn created an enormous challenge and put the burden on the schools, and not only the students, to improve. The next step was to institutionalize the mission statement and develop a clear set of improvement goals around which the system and its distinct components could organize.

2. Establishing a Set of Measurable Performance Standards

In keeping with our mission statement, the Prince George's County Public Schools developed a discrete set of system improvement goals. We went public with our goals so as to assure that community pressure was maintained and our feet were held to the fire. Our goals were simple and ambitious and designed to focus on how well schools were attaining student performance objectives, not on how well they were complying with district rules and procedures. In other words, the new standards focused on educational outcomes rather than on educational inputs:

We found the root cause of our problem to be low expectations for ourselves and negative attitudes about the potential of our students.

1. Enter the top CAT quartile systemwide by 1990.
2. Reduce the gap between white and black student achievement.
3. Improve student achievement as evidenced by annual increases in the percent of students at each grade level who attain essential objectives on Criterion Referenced Tests.

4. Increase the proportion of students who enroll in higher level or advanced placement courses.
5. Increase student and teacher attendance annually.

Against a backdrop of the district's goals and the needs of the individual schools and student populations, all staff were required to develop an appropriate set of standards for student outcomes and educational practices to achieve during the school year. These goals are now updated annually. Examples of student outcome standards include improvements in achievement gains; reductions in suspensions, absenteeism and dropouts; and increases in enrollments in advanced placement and other higher level courses. Some examples of educational practice include the provision of effective staff development, and demonstrated improvements in classroom instruction and use of data.

Once standards were clearly set, it was critical to develop a range of assessment tools that would accurately measure student performance and school improvement. The first task was to move away from reliance on norm-referenced tests which could only measure the progress of large groups of students on relatively basic skills and give little or no information on the progress of individual students to acquire the needed depth of knowledge and higher order thinking skills. While norm-referenced tests are appropriate tools for identifying global areas of strength or weakness at the district level, this kind of group measure is not useful to teachers who have to design lessons for individual students. In order to hold teachers responsible for educating individual students, it was critical for us to design some new assessment tools.

Accordingly, Prince George's County Public Schools undertook a significant effort to develop a Criterion-Referenced Testing program (CRT's) that would measure mastery of local curriculum on a range of content areas. CRT's have since been given three times a year. The targets of this assessment method are focused in two respects. First, the focus of analysis is the individual student, not the mythical average student. The CRT reporting format allows teachers to identify the specific learning needs of the individual student and to reshape their instructional program accordingly. Second, student scores on CRT's are reported not in the aggregate, but rather as the "percentage of items correct" in specific skill areas. This disaggregation allowed teachers to formulate the students' learning plans by targeting individual skill areas. The advent of the CRT's has helped us move beyond the area of basic skills to teach more advanced skills that are required to process, synthesize and apply knowledge. The new challenge is to develop a broader range of assessment tools that takes the form of essays, projects and other like demonstrations of competence.

Once standards were clearly set, it was critical to develop a range of assessment tools that would accurately measure student performance and school improvement.

In concert with the development of new assessment tools, we established an Effective School Audit Advisory Process to assess the overall improvement in each school. The emphasis of the initial audit process was to determine the degree to which staff were aware of and involved in the improvement of their school. Trained teams of principals and teachers from other county schools visited designated schools for one day to interview the principal and staff, visit classrooms and review data. Problem areas were identified and a plan to address these areas was developed by the school. Now in its fifth year, the audit process has been updated to reflect the degree to which schools are meeting their goals and to examine the extent to which their school improvement efforts have established quality and equity within the school.

As a final measure and to give the accountability plan the teeth needed to promote positive change, there is a direct link between performance on the outcome standards and the evaluation of personnel. As a matter of fact, a large part of the evaluation of staff is based on the extent to which agreed-upon goals are achieved.

3. Empowering Staff with Knowledge

The quid pro quo of holding employees responsible for meeting high standards is to arm staff with the knowledge and skills needed to effect positive change at the school-house level. Accordingly, soon after the development of the mission statement and performance standards, we launched a systemwide Effective Schools model of school improvement.

In keeping with our mission statement, an "effective school" is one in which all students within the school, regardless of race, gender or socioeconomic status, learn the essential curriculum and where the school makes whatever efforts are necessary to increase that learning. An "effective school" is a place for teaching and learning, where quality and equity exist side by side.

There are seven correlates of an "effective school," including developing a clear and focused mission, creating a safe and orderly environment, establishing a climate of high expectations for success, demonstrating strong instructional leadership, monitoring and adjusting student progress frequently, maximizing student time on task, and advancing positive home/school relations.

We reoriented all staff development to this effort. Based on the Effective Schools research of the past two decades, the new training effort underscored the expectation that "all

The new ideas about staff development training were based on the expectation that "all students can learn" and stressed the primary function of schools as "places for teaching and learning."

students can learn'' and stressed the primary function of schools as ''places for teaching and learning.'' The program nourished the ideal that not only do schools ''make a difference'' but also that any improved quality of instruction must coexist with improved equality of opportunity. The initial program -- called Advanced Leadership -- focused on the principal, the instructional leader of the school. The program, designed by the principals themselves, required principals to go back to ''school'' every month. Seminars and workshops featured experts in educational management and instructional leadership from across the nation who shared their views on recent educational reforms and offered strategies for principals to employ to bring about positive change in their schools. Today, emphasis is placed on implementing specific school-based plans and using Criterion-Referenced Testing as a tool for instructional management. Each year the training culminates in an annual summer institute -- a three-day retreat devoted to reviewing the previous year's program and to organizing for the future.

In addition to the principals' training program, similar training was set up for teachers and supervisory and support personnel who aspired to leadership positions. In its fourth year of operation, teachers and other system staff who choose to take part in pre-leadership after school hours are exposed to an intense series of lectures, seminars, and written and oral assessments that detail the expectations and requirements of the principalship, along with information on recent reform movements. Applicants who are able to demonstrate an ability to reach logical conclusions, to make high quality decisions, to identify educational needs and to set priorities in phase one of pre-leadership, move on to take part in a series of administrative training activities. A final, structured interview represents the last phase of pre-leadership. The pre-leadership program prepares a ready pool of personnel from which to draw principals. Since its inception, more than 75 staff who have participated in pre-leadership training have been appointed as principals in the county.

We set out to institutionalize the reforms by asking each school to: (1) conduct a self-examination, (2) develop an individual school improvement plan, and (3) create a permanent school team, representative of all components of the staff, to guide the effort. Today, such improvement teams operate in all 171 Prince George's County Public Schools. Through our Office of Staff Development, teachers were made aware of the behaviors that could communicate high expectations to students and help to establish an atmosphere of caring where students would feel valued and welcome. Teachers worked on infusing higher order thinking skills into every part of the curriculum in every classroom for all students, not just the gifted and talented. Teachers were given strategies to organize their classrooms to maximize time on task and time on learning. A lot of time was spent teaching them how to

Seminars and workshops featured experts in instructional leadership and educational management from across the nation who offered their strategies for principals to bring about positive change in their schools.

utilize assessment data effectively to ensure that students within their classrooms were learning successfully and grouped properly.

Our newest initiative in staff development is to develop the capacity within schools to deliver staff training. As we restructure, we have felt the need to move away from the wholesale workshop approach where teachers come "en masse" to a one-shot session without regard to their particular level of professional development or area of need. Our attempt is to keep staff development at the school-building level. For example, this year as part of our new policy to expose more students to algebra, a math teacher in each middle school has been trained as a staff developer to offer ongoing assistance to colleagues at the school house whether it be to teach colleagues state-of-the-art instructional techniques or to illuminate weaknesses in classroom instruction. We see this as the wave of the future.

4. Increasing Autonomy at the School Level

The implementation of the Effective Schools Process was phase one of a serious attempt to return authority to the school-house level. Where the process has been implemented properly, it has given schools the opportunity to engage in strategic, long-range planning and to think beyond traditional solutions to effect school improvement. It has freed teachers to exercise their professional judgment on how best to promote effective schools conducive to student learning and has given teachers the professional autonomy they need to decide how to get the job done for students while holding them accountable for results.

Giving schools control over their budgets was the next logical step -- a natural outgrowth of the Effective Schools Process. Adding this component of school-based management to the school improvement process would enable local school personnel not only to identify specific needs and to seek solutions to those needs, but would give them the flexibility and authority to decide how to use the resources assigned to the school to address the identified needs. School-based management, then, is the tool to assist schools in placing their school improvement plan into operation. In this context, school-based management enables a school to "operationalize" its values of quality and equity.

Professional automony with school-based accountability has freed principals and teachers to exercise their professional judgment on how best to promote practices conducive to learning.

On a pilot basis, 80 schools were given permission to cut loose from the bureaucracy to determine their budget priorities. They now have the ability to make -- or at least to strongly influence -- decisions concerning such things as the instructional materials and methods, the staffing structure, and the organization of the school day. Within the confines of stated district goals, and relevant local, state and federal regulations, a school staff is given

its total budget allotment for instructional materials, staffing, facility operation and maintenance, staff development and other operating costs. Then, school staffs determine how they wish to spend available resources. If they want to use their entire allotment to purchase additional staff positions, they can do it. If they want to "trade-in" one kind of staff position to gain another, they have the power to do that, too.

The pilot is in its infancy and requests have been modest, but some key trends have emerged. Several elementary schools have created science specialist positions and have replaced their Media Specialist with a Technology Resource Specialist. Many others have used funds to hire instructional aides to free teachers of clerical tasks and to facilitate parallel block scheduling. Still others have traded in several part-time staff positions with the hope of acquiring one or more full-time positions. Through their purchasing power, school staffs are telling us in the central office which positions are useful and which ones are outdated.

Of course, the flip side of returning initiative and responsibility to schools was to loosen the reins of the central office. Accordingly, the central office orientation changed from "mandating and prescribing" to "nurturing and supporting" school efforts. Along with this shift in attitude and responsibility, central office divisions have turned positions back to schools annually and each year, divisions are asked to review the roles and responsibilities of staff to determine if they could be better utilized at the school-house level.

5. Increasing Resources to Support Innovation

We knew that in order to bring about real and sustained change, the district had to back up its words with resources and assume a leadership role in developing new concepts for restructuring schools. We knew that an accountability plan that overemphasized standards and assessment and did not adequately provide for improvement would be somewhat like a doctor taking the temperature of a sick patient on a regular basis and never providing treatment. It would be all diagnosis and no cure.

The flip side of returning this initiative and responsibility to schools was to loosen the reins of central office by changing the orientation from always "mandating and prescribing" to "nurturing and supporting" school efforts.

In Prince George's County, we were faced with 16 elementary schools located in disadvantaged communities with large minority populations that were too isolated to be successfully integrated. We needed an alternative to integration that would better meet the needs of the minority youngsters attending those schools. Columbia Park Elementary, one of the schools described at the outset of this paper, was just this kind of school. We call them Milliken II schools (named after the Governor of Michigan who originated the idea of compensatory benefits for non-desegregated schools in Detroit). Each Milliken II elemen-

tary school features a reduced instructional staff-to-student ratio of one to twenty, has a full-time guidance counselor, a full-time media specialist and a full-time reading teacher. Skill development for reading, language arts and mathematics is enhanced through the use of a full computer lab in each school. The computer lab offers students not only the opportunity to improve their academic skills but also to become familiar with the application of computer technology. A special "take-home" computer program allows parents to use the equipment with their children as an educational tool at home. Each elementary school also features an after-school tutorial program, full-day kindergarten, enriched field trips, cultural arts activities and a summer enrichment program.

The program fosters high expectations for all children, a positive social and academic environment, and the adaptation of the school system's curriculum to specific needs of students. A primary feature of the Milliken II relief is the Comer School Development Program (based on the work of James Comer, Director of the School Development Program at the Yale Child Study Center) which stresses coordination and cooperation among all members of the school community. The Comer program requires that local schools be managed by an "active partnership" of school staff and parents that work to improve students' self-confidence and ultimately their performance. Each parent/staff team meets on a regular basis to develop a positive school climate, assess academic needs and facilitate the development of a comprehensive school plan.

Comer freely admits that he drew heavily on his own life experiences in developing this school improvement approach. He and three of his closest friends -- all black -- lived on the fringe of the highest socioeconomic, predominantly white neighborhood. His friends were just as bright and able as anybody in school, yet they entered a downhill and tragic life course. One died early from alcoholism, a second spent some time in jail, and a third has been in and out of mental institutions. Since his teens, Comer believes that the only difference between him and his friends was the involvement of his parents in his education.

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Comer has vivid memories of his parents taking him to museums, parades and on shopping trips. Even the weekly visit to the grocery store provided an educational experience. He would read labels on the canned goods, pay the check-out clerk, and count the change. He remembers his parents having countless exchanges with teachers, principals, clerks and custodians from his schools about his progress and their expectations. The Comer model is built on the belief that only concerted efforts to create a shared sense of purpose between parents and school staff can reduce the alienation which many poor black children show in "acting out" in school and in poor academic performance.

So far, the results of the Milliken/Comer program have been dramatic. From 1985 to 1989, Milliken II schools' gains on the CAT have outdistanced district gains by almost two to one. Since 1984, black students from these schools have registered a 28-point gain in the third grade and a 20-point gain in the fifth grade on the CAT. We are confident that these gains will be substantiated by gains on the CRTs in the coming years.

In addition, program officials and the schools provide accounts of the impact of the Comer Process in many of the Milliken schools. These include an increase in the participation rates of parents in the school program, improved relationships among members of the school community, high expectations for all children, a positive social and academic environment and the adaptation of the school system's curriculum to the specific needs of students. Principals have also reported higher attendance rates, lower frequencies of suspensions and disciplinary referrals, and a greater sense of ownership among staff for the schools' problems and accomplishments.

Replicating the Accountability Model Nationwide

The beauty in the accountability model outlined above is that it can be easily replicated in other school districts. There simply has to be the will to do so. In Maryland, Governor William Donald Schaefer has provided districts with the incentive -- the will -- to institute real change at the local level by designing a state school performance plan complete with a system of rewards, technical assistance and sanctions. In developing the plan, Governor Schaefer insisted on the need to create a system which would maximize the potential of each and every student and not focus on raising the "mythical average." He wanted to see a significant increase in the proportion of students, from all backgrounds, performing at or near the highest level of achievement.

Principals have reported higher attendance rates, lower frequencies of suspensions and discipline referrals, and a greater sense of ownership among staff for school problems and achievements.

The Maryland plan is designed to: (1) identify strengths and weaknesses in school performance, (2) provide strong incentives for improved results throughout the system by linking performance to tangible consequences, and (3) create the conditions which will lead to improved academic achievement for all children through the stimulation of local diversity and experimentation. While the plan demands changes at both the school-house and the district levels, it recognizes that sustained changes in the way schools and districts conduct business cannot occur without corresponding changes in the way the state operates. The important point is that the state performance plan is much more than an assessment plan. It

is combined with a broader system designed to encourage improvement at all levels. Specifically, the Maryland plan calls for the development and implementation of:

1. Performance standards that evidence high student achievement and sound educational practice in both schools and districts;

2. A school and district accreditation system to identify those schools/districts that are exemplary and deserving of rewards, or in the alternative, those schools and/or districts that are unable to achieve a reasonable set of educational outcomes and require technical assistance, or those that are chronically low performing and require some sort of State foreclosure;

3. State CRT's at key exit grades that have both a functional and excellent level of performance in an attempt to push the curriculum toward higher order thinking skills and raise the ceiling of educational performance;

4. Individual educational plans for students who fail to meet the functional level on the state CRT's to ensure that children do not fall between the cracks;

5. A systematic process through which unnecessary administrative and regulatory barriers to experimentation at both the state and local levels are removed;

6. New educational models through the creation of a Schools of the Future grant program;

7. A variety of methods to improve the quality and supply of talented teachers and administrators including the creation of alternative paths to certification and changes in college teacher educational curricula; and,

8. A restructured State Department of Education whose major responsibility and mission would be to bring about positive change in school through the dissemination of information and on-site technical assistance to schools and districts.

In Maryland, real change at the local level will now occur through a state performance plan that is being designed with a system of rewards, technical assistance and sanctions.

Summary

The gains we have seen in minority achievement in Prince George's County are proof that youngsters will excel when provided with the proper environment and support. Under the Prince George's County accountability management system, expectations have been raised, teachers have been motivated and students too long disenfranchised by the system have been given a real shot at realizing equal intellectual opportunity in school.

There is an additional pay-off to implementing a strong accountability management system for school districts. Once an accountability system takes hold and dramatic achievement gains for all students are realized, educators can make a real case for increasing revenues so sorely needed to keep pace with the growing demands. In Prince George's County alone, our budget has risen over 50 percent in a period of five short years thanks to renewed public confidence in the schools.

END

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